

Notes on the field identification of the bulbuls (Pycnonotidae) of Upper Guinea

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Part II: *Phyllastrephus* and remaining genera

Résumé: Des notes comparatives sont présentées sur l'identification sur le terrain des bulbuls de la Haute Guinée, basée sur les caractères-clé du plumage et des parties dénudées, le comportement, les vocalisations et les préférences d'habitat. Les imprécisions relevées dans la littérature actuellement disponible sont indiquées.

Species notes (continued)

Phyllastrephus (Plate 3)

In general, *Phyllastrephus* greenbulbs are among the smaller members of the family. They are insectivorous and are often members of mixed bird parties. They occur in family groups, usually in the lower and middle strata of the forest, and are not especially vocal; group members emit frequent contact calls but these are of low volume and are not very memorable. Identification, therefore, usually rests on visual characters which are fairly straightforward.

13. *Phyllastrephus icterinus* Icterine Greenbul (Plate 3). This species is common and widely distributed from Ghana to Sierra Leone in the forest zone. It is rare either to see *P. icterinus* anywhere other than in a mixed bird party or a mixed bird party that does not include it! Small in size, with dull olive-green upper parts, drab yellowish underparts, except for a brighter throat and a dull rufous tail contrasting with the remainder of the upper parts, the colour tones of this species are unlike those shown by any *Andropadus*, being at the same time both brighter and paler than their sombre hues. It is further separated from *Andropadus* by its gregarious habits and its behaviour of gleaning in leaves, shoots and tangles. It is also less skulking than *Andropadus* species.

The fact that the throat is brighter yellow than the breast can cause initial confusion with *Criniger olivaceus* but *P. icterinus* lacks the deep olive tones, tufted yellow throat feathers clearly demarcated from the olive upper breast, bare orbital skin and woodpecker-like, trunk-clinging behaviour of that species.

14. *Phyllastrephus albigularis* White-throated Greenbul (Plate 3). This species is rather larger than *P. icterinus* and often occurs down to ground level where *P. icterinus* is rarely seen. Less common than *P. icterinus*, at least in the forest zone proper, it is perhaps more

frequent in gallery forest. The species occurs throughout the region as far west as Sierra Leone with an apparently isolated population in southern Senegal. It is less often encountered in mixed bird parties than *P. icterinus*, being regularly seen in small, monospecific groups.

The white throat is a reasonably good field character, contrasting strongly with the grey head and breast. The latter has an admixture of yellow, which increases on the lower breast and belly, but is nothing like the depth of yellow shown by *P. icterinus*. The feathering in the dark-grey crown is rather loose and can suggest a vague crest. The iris is creamy white to light grey, obviously pale when seen well (*contra* the plate in Keith *et al*^b). As in *P. icterinus*, the upper side of the tail is richer olive-rufous than the back and wings and this contrast is apparent in the field.

This species differs from *Criniger calurus*, which also has a white throat, in its smaller size, lack of 'beard' and eye-ring and different coloured underparts.

Since we never saw *P. albigularis* either in company with or, indeed, on the same ground as *P. icterinus*; it is possible they are mutually exclusive.

15. *Phyllastrephus baumanni* Baumann's Greenbul (Plate 3). We have only limited field experience of this species. We are grateful, therefore, to Mr G. D. Field for allowing us to make use of his unpublished field observations of *P. baumanni* from Sierra Leone, on which the following notes are based.

P. baumanni is a dull-coloured bird which, seen briefly, could be confused with an *Andropadus* or a *Trichastoma* babbler. It behaves, however, much like *P. icterinus*, and is usually seen in small groups of up to six individuals in company with other species. It occurs, mostly, in the shrubby understorey but ranges from ground level to the mid-stratum. It has the habit of flicking its wings and can be very noisy, scolding at intruders with harsh *chayr chayr* calls while raising its

crown feathers in a weak crest. It also has a surprisingly sweet little song, *chuwheet chuwheet chuwheet weet*, which fades away at the end.

In Sierra Leone it is most common in semi-deciduous forests on mountain slopes, just reaching gallery forest on the plateaux of the Tingi and Loma mountains. It also occurs, however, in lowland forest corridors in the west of the country. Elsewhere in the region it is known from scattered localities east to Togo. It is not a rain forest species and only overlaps marginally with *P. icterinus*, being largely segregated from it by altitude. It also overlaps little with *P. albigularis*, which is largely restricted to lowland gallery forest.

P. baumanni is dark brown above, olive-grey below, sometimes with a paler chin and throat. The upper side of the tail is, like other *Phyllastrephus*, more rufous, while the under tail-coverts and underside of the tail are a rather distinctive pale sandy rufous. Eye colour appears to be variable, ranging from 'light', 'reddish' to 'dark' while the bill is two-toned with the upper mandible dark, the lower whitish, horn or yellowish.

16. *Phyllastrephus leucolepis* Liberian (Spot-winged) Greenbul (Plate 3). To date, Gatter² seems to be the only ornithologist to have seen this bird in the field, at the type locality in south-eastern Liberia. It has been sought extensively in neighbouring Tai Forest, Côte d'Ivoire, without success (M. E. Gartshore pers. comm.). From the published description, field identification should be straightforward. The bird is similar to *P. icterinus* but for a brighter chestnut tail and very conspicuous spotting on the wing: cream-coloured, sub-terminal spots on the primaries and secondaries and a row of whitish to creamy grey spots on the greater coverts, alula, and greater and median primary coverts, forming two bright bars on the brown wing.

Chlorocichla (Plate 3)

17. *Chlorocichla simplex* Simple Greenbul. (Plate 3) This is a species of secondary habitats (eg abandoned farms, overgrown cultivation and forest regrowth) within the forest zone and extends into the Guinea savanna to the north. It is widespread, occurring throughout the region as far west as Guinea Bissau and may be locally common. It is usually seen in pairs in the top of dense thickets and the canopy of low trees. It is rather larger than the Common Bulbul which it superficially resembles in general colour. It has a conspicuous white throat but the broken eye-ring, in the form of two white crescents, one above, one below the eye, is an even better field mark. Vocalisations include a frequently uttered nasal chattering and a scolding *wherr*.

18. *Chlorocichla flavicollis* Yellow-throated Leaflove. (Plate 1) Identification of this large species is straightforward since it is not a bird of forest, but rather one of the Guinea savanna. It frequents dense woodland and thicket such as occur along water courses; it does not appear to penetrate heavy gallery forest. It occurs throughout the region, north of the forest zone.

The conspicuous yellow throat (not tufted, as in *Criniger*) which contrasts with the olive-grey of the rest of the underparts, the palish eye and the garrulous behaviour, mean there is little chance of confusion with other bulbul species. It can be shy, however, and is not always easy to see well. It is mostly found in pairs or noisy family parties, mainly in the middle and lower strata of its habitat, although rarely on the ground.

Other Genera (Plate 4)

19. *Pyrrhurus scandens* Leaflove. (Plate 4) This is a large, handsome species, frequenting forest fringing rivers in the Guinea savanna where it occupies the canopy and middle stratum, only occasionally descending lower. In its riparian habitat it is common but is rarely encountered elsewhere. It occurs throughout the region but is apparently absent from large parts of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Its plumage pattern is unique among bulbuls of the region: the pale grey head contrasts with the pale olivaceous back and white throat, while the remainder of the underparts are creamy buff and the tail light chestnut.

The Leaflove draws attention to itself by its incessant call, at least during the first half of the day. It lives in loquacious family parties that keep up a loud and pleasant conversational cackling between themselves for long periods, which makes the species easy to locate and identify. It is not always so easy to see, however, as it usually keeps well hidden.

This species has often been placed in the genus *Phyllastrephus*, but, on the basis of field characters and behaviour at least, it seems out of place in such company. By its vocal nature and behaviour it seems to be closer to *Chlorocichla flavicollis* (which is sometimes also placed within *Pyrrhurus*) and, even more so, to *Thescelocichla leucopleura*. The calls of all three species are very similar.

Plate 4 (page 92)

	(left)	(right)
Top:	<i>Pyrrhurus scandens</i>	<i>Thescelocichla leucopleura</i>
Centre:	<i>Calypotocichla serina</i>	<i>Ixonotus guttatus</i>
Bottom:	<i>Baeopogon indicator</i>	<i>Nicator chloris</i>

Not to scale (Mark Andrews)





20. *Thescelocichla leucopleura* Swamp Palm Greenbul. (Plate 4) This is another large, easily identifiable species, which is found throughout the region wherever its particular habitat requirements are met. As its vernacular name indicates, it is associated with palm trees, particularly raffia and, to a lesser extent, oil palm (although it is absent from oil palm plantation monocultures). This fidelity is striking - the species is never seen far from these trees. *T. leucopleura* is boldly patterned; the upper parts are dark olive-brown and contrast strongly with the pale grey-buff of the upper breast and the pale yellowish lower breast and belly. Broad white tips to the outer tail feathers are an excellent field mark.

This species shows a strong similarity to the previous one in call and behaviour: it is only found in voluble family parties which play follow-my-leader between palms. The bird's call comprises a raucous, nasal cackling that sounds like a tape recording of a conversation played too fast. It may be poorly transcribed as *quank-quank* - pause - *quek-quek-quek-quek*, with the latter rising in pitch. One bird will commence and the call is then immediately taken up by other members of the group.

21. *Calyptocichla serina* Golden (Serine) Greenbul. (Plate 4) The Golden Greenbul is restricted to primary and well developed secondary forest and occurs, in the region, from Ghana to Sierra Leone. It occurs singly or in pairs in the canopy, where it is rather uncommon. Seen well, it is easy to identify - it is the only species of the canopy to show golden-yellow tones in its underparts which become bright yellow on the centre of the belly, while above it is wholly olive-green. Furthermore, it is the only bulbul to have a pale pinkish bill, which is a good field mark. The call consists of a clear, short *tiup-chieew*, with the stress on the last syllable.

22. *Ixonotus guttatus* Spotted Greenbul. (Plate 4) This species is readily identifiable on plumage, call and behaviour. It is found, from Ghana to Sierra Leone, in the forest proper in the canopy, where it occurs in groups of seven to 15 (occasionally more than 20) individuals, which restlessly glean insects from leaves and branches. It has the endearing habit of raising one wing alternately when doing this. The monospecific

flocks are very mobile and maintain contact with one another by incessantly emitting a dry chirping or 'tick-ing' call, rather like the noise made by an electrical spark.

The plumage is also conspicuous - dark olive-brown on the back and wings except for the eponymous white spotting on the wing coverts, inner secondaries and rump. The breast, belly and outer tail feathers are also white, tinged yellow, making this, along with *T. leucopleura*, the palest of the bulbuls of the region.

23. *Baeopogon indicator* Honeyguide Greenbul. (Plate 4). As the common name indicates, this species superficially resembles a large honeyguide. It is a mainly dark bird; dark olive-green above, dark olive-grey on the throat, breast and flanks. The belly and under tail-coverts are, however, whitish-buff while the two outer pairs of tail feathers are conspicuously white, tipped blackish-brown. These are obvious field characters when the bird is in flight. It also has a conspicuously pale iris, making identification straightforward. Most references state that the white iris is confined to males and that females have brown eyes. From our experience, this does not appear to be true of the Upper Guinea race. We suspect that females also have pale irides, with brown eye colour, perhaps, confined to juveniles.

B. indicator occurs singly or in pairs in the upper-middle layer and canopy of the forest and hence requires mature trees or forest that is not heavily degraded. In the region, it occurs from Togo to Sierra Leone where it is widespread and generally common. It has a wide range of calls which are unlike those of any other bulbul. One is a single note like the mewing of a cat. The main song is a clear, vigorous thrush-like whistle comprising a series of melodious drawn out notes. The song is often abbreviated as a hurried *vik-vik-view* or *tiu-liuuw*, the last note of which is always the longest.

24. *Nicator chloris* Western Nicator. (Plate 4) The Nicator occurs throughout the region in the forest and forest-savanna mosaic zones. It is a skulking species of tangles, dense foliage and thick cover of all sorts. It is, therefore, not often seen but when it is, identification is straightforward thanks to the heavy gold spotting on the wing coverts and secondaries. Otherwise, the bird is olive-green above with yellow tips to the outer tail feathers, pale grey below with yellow under tail-coverts. It has a heavy bill and, consequently, rather resembles a *Malaconotus* bush-shrike, with which group it may, in fact, belong. This is a species more often heard than seen as it produces an explosive crescendo of notes which, both loud and distinctive,

Plate 3 (page 93)

	(left)	(right)
Top:	<i>Phyllastrephus icterinus</i>	<i>P. albigularis</i>
Centre:	<i>P. baumanni</i>	<i>P. leucolepis</i>
Bottom:	<i>Chlorocichla simplex</i>	<i>C. flavicollis</i>

Not to scale (Mark Andrews)

Table 1 Summary of distribution, habitat and aspects of behaviour of bulbuls in Upper Guinea
Table 1 Sommaire de la distribution, l'habitat et le comportement des bulbuls de la haute Guinée

Species	Zone	Habitat	Stratum	Mixed bird parties	Sociality	Ant swarms
<i>Criniger barbatus</i>	RF-FSM	CF	L	Yes	G	Yes
<i>Criniger calurus</i>	RF-FSM	CF	L	Yes	G	Yes
<i>Criniger olivaceus</i>	RF	CF	L-M	Yes	P-G	No
<i>Bleda canicapilla</i>	RF-FSM	CF	G-L	Yes	P-G	Yes
<i>Bleda syndactyla</i>	RF	CF	G-L	Yes	S-P	Yes
<i>Bleda eximia</i>	RF	CF	G-L	Yes	S-P	Yes
<i>Andropadus gracilirostris</i>	RF-FSM	CF-DEG	U-C	No	S-P	No
<i>Andropadus latirostris</i>	RF-FSM	CF	L-M	Yes	S-P	(Yes)
<i>Andropadus virens</i>	RF-FSM-GS	DEG-SCR	L-M	No	S-P	No
<i>Andropadus curvirostris</i>	RF-FSM	CF-DEG	L-M	No	S-P	No
<i>Andropadus gracilis</i>	RF-FSM	CF-DEG	(U)-M	No	S-P-G	No
<i>Andropadus ansorgei</i>	RF	CF	U-(M)	No	S-P-G	No
<i>Phyllastrephus icterinus</i>	RF	CF	L-M	Yes	G	No
<i>Phyllastrephus albigularis</i>	RF-FSM	CF	G-L-M	(Yes)	G	No
<i>Phyllastrephus baumanni</i>	FSM	CF	L-M	Yes	G	No
<i>Phyllastrephus leucocolepis</i>	RF	CF	L-M	Yes	S-P	No
<i>Chlorocichla simplex</i>	RF-FSM-GS	DEG-SCR	U-C	No	S-P	No
<i>Chlorocichla flavicollis</i>	GS	W-T-FP	L-M	No	P-G	No
<i>Pyrrhurus scandens</i>	FSM-GS	RF	M-U-C	No	G	No
<i>Thescelocichla leucopleura</i>	RF-FSM	Palms-SF	U-C	No	G	No
<i>Calyptocichla serina</i>	RF	CF	U-C	No	S-P	No
<i>Ixonotus guttatus</i>	RF	CF	U-C	No	G	No
<i>Baeopogon indicator</i>	RF-FSM	CF	U-C	No	S-P	No
<i>Nicator chloris</i>	RF-FSM	CF-DEG	L-M	No	S-P	No

Key: Zone (Vegetation)

RF = Rain Forest
 FSM = Forest Savanna Mosaic
 GS = Guinea Savanna

Stratum

G = Ground U = Upper
 L = Lower C = Canopy
 M = Middle

Sociality

S = Singles
 P = Pairs
 G = Groups

Habitat

CF = Closed (primary and mature secondary) Forest
 RF = Riverine Forest
 DEG = Degraded (secondary) Forest
 SCR = Scrub

W = Woodland
 T = Thicket
 FP = Forest Patch
 SF = Swamp Forest

Parentheses indicate the feature is less marked or common. The table is intended as a guide only; many exceptions will occur.

are quite unlike any other bulbul (or *Malaconotus* bush-shrike either!) but can be confused with those of the Yellowbill *Ceuthmochares aereus*. It is usually found singly.

We do not imagine that we have written the definitive account of the identification of the bulbuls of Upper Guinea and much remains to be learned of all species discussed. We believe, however, that the foregoing represents an advance on the material hitherto available. We hope, at least, these notes will stimulate others to look more critically at bulbuls and therefore, by implication, at this paper.

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